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SUBJECT: ATLANTIC CANADA: REACTIONS TO THE NEW HARPER CABINET

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11. SUMMARY: Prime Minister Harper's decision on who will be representing Atlantic Canada in his cabinet has generally received a positive reaction here. There have been many accolades for the three MPs the Prime Minister selected: Nova Scotia's Peter MacKay (Foreign Affairs), Greg Thompson of New Brunswick (Veterans Affairs) and Loyola Hearn of Newfoundland-Labrador (Fisheries and Oceans). Negative comments center on the small number of representatives from the region and the perception that the new Prime Minister may have overlooked the interests of the province of Prince Edward Island. END SUMMARY

Peter MacKay - The New Regional "Super Minister"

12. By far the most significant appointment for the Atlantic region was Nova Scotia MP Peter MacKay to the senior post of Foreign Affairs Minister. Columnists, election-watchers, fellow Conservative politicians and even Liberal opponents were unanimous in their assessment that MacKay was a good choice as the Prime Minister's lead man for the important portfolio. Described as an able performer, approachable, intelligent and highly competent, MacKay's lofty position in the Harper cabinet has also given him the additional title of "super minister" for the four provinces. This elevated status, as one Nova Scotia columnist commented, makes up for the fact that the province had two ministers in the former Liberal cabinet, but in lesser portfolios. As for predictions on how MacKay would fare in his high profile job, pundits see Liberal Opposition leader Bill Graham as a potential threat to the new minister. Since Graham served as Foreign Affairs minister himself, some see him giving the newly minted minister a hard time when the two of them first square off in the House of Commons.

13. MacKay's additional duties as the Minister responsible for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, the body that coordinates business development in the region, has puts him under scrutiny with the regional business community. So far business leaders have reacted positively to MacKay, characterizing him as progressive, open to the needs of small business, and most importantly, as an avid defender of the agency itself which has come under criticism for its perceived ineffectiveness. The PM's decision to also name MacKay as Prince Edward Island's representative in the cabinet means a very heavy workload for the minister. While the merits of that particular decision is a hot topic here (see para 6), overall, there is a very positive reaction to MacKay's ascension to such a high position in the cabinet and most predict a bright future for the young minister.

## Greg Thompson - The Veterans' New Friend in Ottawa

14. New Brunswick's Greg Thompson's appointment as the new Minister of Veterans Affairs is also being well received. Thompson already has an established reputation as a keen constituency-minded MP, a positive image bolstered by his tough opposition to a planned liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal in Maine and his pledge to help compensate soldiers affected in the 1960s by the use of defoliants including Agent Orange at a Canadian Forces training area in the province. The latter issue has grabbed the most public attention, as veterans and political-watchers are anxious to see how long it takes the new minister to fulfill his promise to get compensation for the former soldiers. Thompson has indeed made the issue a top priority, relegating others to the backburner for now. Included are those of direct U.S. interest such as the LNG issue and his long-standing pledge to help ensure the new border crossing at Calais-St. Stephen moves along. In summing up his appointment, observers say that while the new minister has a solid reputation he will have to move fast on the compensation issue or risk damage to his reputation as the province's newest champion in Ottawa.

## Loyola Hearn - No Honeymoon for a Popular Minister

15. Newfoundland-Labrador cabinet rep, Fisheries and Oceans Minister Loyola Hearn has had little time to enjoy the honeymoon phase of his cabinet appointment. There is already intense pressure on the new minister to begin addressing long-standing issues, chief among them, his pledge to push for custodial management of the nose and tail of the Grand Banks, one of the most lucrative fishing areas just outside Canada's 200-mile limit. Up to this point Hearn has said he is studying the Department's files on this issue. However, people like Newfoundland-Labrador premier Danny Williams want to see Hearn and the Prime Minister take quick action on the issue. The premier also has a long list of other items waiting to discuss with Hearn, such as allocation of fish quotas, access issues,

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retirement packages for fishermen and the province's long-standing priority: co-management of the fishing industry. While all this appears to be a staggering workload, the perception is that the new minister has the strength and the legislative experience to see him through what could be a rocky start to his ministerial career.

## General Reaction To the Harper Cabinet Appointments

16. Like their counterparts across the country, Atlantic Canadians had some definite opinions on how PM Harper structured his cabinet, including the surprising news that the PM would appoint former Liberal MP David Emerson to the cabinet. However, the PM's other controversial move that got more play here was his decision to appoint the un-elected Michael Fortier to represent the city of Montreal's interests in the cabinet. Both the Emerson and Fortier appointments were seen here as definite missteps by the new PM and moves which would ultimately adversely affect his credibility. Prince Edward Island Liberals were particularly harsh in their reaction to the Fortier appointment, saying that the PM's argument that Montreal deserved representation was ironic given that the Island province was in a similar situation. With no Conservative MPs to draw from, the prevailing opinion is that the PM should have been equally creative in devising a way to see that he met the needs of the province. Equally upsetting to the critics was the PM's appointment of MacKay to handle the province's interests. While they avoided criticism of MacKay's personal abilities to do the job, the Liberals, joined by some Island commentators, contend the now already busy minister will have little time to focus on the province. (Comment: While there is a certain logic to this argument, the reality faced by the PM is that there are probably single blocks in Montreal that have a larger population than PEI. End Comment)

¶17. Another bone of contention throughout the region was the size of the Atlantic contingent in the cabinet, the smallest in recent memory. The region got three ministers and one parliamentary secretary, Rob Moore of New Brunswick who will be going to the Justice portfolio. Critics were quick to condemn the PM for picking such a small number of reps, with some seeing it as punishment for the region sticking with the Liberals in the January 23 election. (The region only elected 9 Conservatives in the 32 ridings.) Conservative party representatives have been quick to counter that the Liberals had the same ratio of cabinet ministers to elected MPs, but that has not gone very far in assuaging the critics.

Comment:

¶18. In looking at the regional reaction to the cabinet selection process, the general sentiment is that the three chosen to sit at the cabinet table are all very capable, MacKay in particular. What criticism there is lies, not with his regional selections, but with the Prime Minister's other, more controversial appointments that are inciting almost daily backlashes. For now local commentators are giving their new ministers from the region a positive reception, with the usual proviso that they will wait until they see them in action before passing final judgment. END COMMENT  
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